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ERIC PAUL SHAFFER

Exclusive Interview

Eric Paul Shaffer is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Lähaina Noon, Living at the Monastery, Working in the Kitchen,* and *Portable Planet,* all from Leaping Dog Press. His poetry has appeared in *Ploughshares, North American Review, American Scholar, ACM, Grain, Poetry Ireland Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, Threepenny Review,* and the anthologies *100 Poets Against the War* and *The Soul Unearthed.* In 2002, Shaffer received the Elliot Cades Award for Literature, an endowed literary prize given yearly to an established local writer in Hawaii. In March 2006, Shaffer was awarded a fellowship to attend the prestigious Fishtrap Workshop and Conference, a gathering of writers, publishers, and readers interested in "promoting clear thinking and good writing in and about the [American] West." *Burn & Learn,* his first novel, will be published by Leaping Dog Press in 2007.

CR: What motivated you to begin writing?

EPS: Reading motivated me to start writing. I became a writer because I am a reader. There are many ways to come to writing, but in my view, the best way is to be encouraged to write by another writer. I was enthralled by reading early on when my grandmother taught me to read. My Nana, my mother's mother, Marion Gates Finlay, was the one who taught me to read. I loved to be read to, and she taught me to read by reading me the same story over and over, and as she did, she pointed at every word as she spoke. Eventually, I memorized the story, and I could read along as she pointed at the words, and on that day that she pointed at the words as I read the story, the excitement I felt is what eventually motivated me to write and still does.

CR: You spoke about not having roots when you were a child, has writing poetry become a way of planting roots for you?

EPS: A good question. My father was bit of rainbow-chaser. If there appeared to be a better job elsewhere, we were off and running after that pot of gold. I lived in Baltimore; Seat Pleasant (right off the Eastern tip of the diamond of Washington, D.C.); Greenville, Michigan; Indianapolis, and then I went off to college in Muncie, Indiana; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Davis, California. Finally, I went to Okinawa, Japan, for my first university position.

During all those years, I always felt a bit disconnected, and I knew no way to connect until I started reading and studying the ecological and environmental poetry of Gary Snyder, Antler, Greg Keeler, Ursula LeGuin, and Lew Welch, as well as reading the ecological and environmental non-fiction of Gary Snyder, Loren Eiseley, Marston Bates, Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Dillard, and Aldo Leopold. From them, I learned what it meant to really inhabit a place: we must start from wherever we are. In other words, the land on which we stand is what we must learn to inhabit; learning about the place we live is learning about ourselves. Welch says, "Step out onto the planet," and that is the first and most important step to making ourselves at home on the planet. Discover where you are.

Poetry, then, has become for me a way of recording what I've learned and learning more about what I've discovered. Many of the poems in *Lāhaina Noon* were written for this purpose, and some of the things the poems taught me are harsh lessons, such as those in "Whales at Sunset," "Millennium's End, With Zucchini and Mockingbird," and

"Big Paw." I have not turned away from those truths, but I have also found wonders to celebrate as in "Lähaina Noon," Mozart and the Mockingbird," and "A Blue Curve." Writing poetry I have discovered that I don't always want to hear what I have to say, an amusing notion, but what I say in my poems I do listen to, and I listen carefully because often the poem is wiser than the writer because its sources are wider, broader, and deeper. They go beyond the merely personal into what is common to all humans.

CR: Can you speak about the use of nature and Hawaiian culture in your poems?

EPS: I wish I could say a lot more about this than I can. I am an avid student of Hawai'ian culture and language. I read the history of the islands, and I have taken a year of Hawai'ian language. I wish I knew more and that I was more fluent, and I am working on it. I consider my study of the language, culture, and history of these islands as part of putting down roots, and it is part of my ongoing writing as well.

One of my greatest delights concerning my poems about Hawai'i is the night that one of my students approached me after a poetry reading and said to me, "I already bought your book before, but I want to buy another copy for my friend. You know that poem "Lovers on Pülehu Road"? I think we know those people!" I laughed not only because her comment seems to prove that everybody on Maui really DOES know everyone else, but that I had managed to write something that was meaningful and useful to another inhabitant of the island. I was sharing in the community.

CR: Regarding the creation of your poems, how do you start a poem?

EPS: Most of mine begin with an observation of the world or planet around me. I see something, and I make a note of it. Then, when I sit down at my regular writing time--5:30 AM to 7:00 AM--or one of my irregular writing times--Wednesday night from 7:00 PM to 9:30 PM or Saturday afternoon from 2:00 PM to 5:00 PM--I have something to write about.Often, though, I have nothing in mind when I sit down to write, especially in the early morning. But I am fresh that early, and the rule is that I sit down and start writing words--freewriting or brainstorming--and then see what I find in the sluice, so to speak. Sometimes, there's just sand; sometimes, there's fool's gold; and sometimes, there's something worth panning for.

Extremely infrequently, there is an inspiration that makes me sit down and draft some lines, but that is so rare that waiting for it is unwise. People who wait for inspiration are usually not writers. Writers write. And they write every day.

CR: Where do you find the source of your poems?

EPS: In my observations of the planet and the world, in looking large (at the volcano on which I live) and looking small (at the wasps and mynas and mongoose running across the south field), in my classroom, at the mall, at the movies, and in the coffee houses. Anywhere I am, I am watching. That is the most important of the jobs of the writer of poems: to observe, to evaluate, to speak. The source is the moment which fuses the event and my presence.

CR: How do you handle revision?

EPS: I revise a lot more than many writers with whom I discuss this issue. I tend to think that writing IS re-writing, but I have many friends and colleagues as writers who think, as Allen Ginsberg does, "First thought, best thought." I wish it worked that way for me, but too often, I find that my poems improve when I tinker with them a bit or even a lot. That is not to say that I haven't destroyed poems by revising them, but that is how we learn. And anyway, anything that you destroy isn't really gone; what's good in it will return for another draft sometime, and if it doesn't, so what? There are plenty of other poems to write. I believe that some poems I start drafting are even meant for me, and I discard those all after I play with them long enough to learn something.

I will write anything just to see where it goes, and then I will toss it, chop it, snap it, drop it, or discard it, depending on what seems best. I never save anything that isn't working; I throw it away. The trash can, which I also call "the round file," is my best editing tool. If you hold onto the garbage, your hands and mind will be full, and when something really great comes your way, you won't be able to grab it for your own. My writing motto is taped to the monitor on my computer: "Reckless in Composition, Ruthless in Revision."

CR: You said, "You're usually done with a poem before it's done with you." Do you find that a poem will come up over and over again throughout the years?

EPS: This is one of those truths it took me a long time to learn. "Poems are not finished; they are abandoned." I have to agree. I find that there is only so much time and so much interest that any one poem can have for me. There is the first flush of excitement, then, the hard and exciting work, and then, the "innate resistance of the material" gets to me, and I "finish" the poem, which usually means that I stop working on it. If it's presentable, I send it out; if it's not, I "round file" it.

I also have a weakness for poems that poke gentle or harsh fun at the writer of poems. We need to remain humble to do this work correctly, so I want to take my medicine. Lately, I have found that poems that darkly regard humans and their treatment of the planet appear on my page. Some disturb me, but I can't deny that those words know what they're talking about. When people ask me to explain myself, though, I often don't know what to say. I want to point to the poem and say, "He did it." My book *Living at the Monastery, Working in the Kitchen* is like that. The poems are all in the voice of Shih-te, an eight-century cook and janitor at a Chinese Buddhist-Taoist monastery. Often, I can't explain or even really understand what those poems are up to. I have my suspicions, but I feel more like a scribe, the recorder, of those poems. The author is Shih-te, some feisty and slightly sideways part of me, but concerning their meaning, I feel, as Melville said after writing *Moby-Dick*, "as spotless as a lamb."

CR: In "Apropos of Nothing" the speaker is staring up at a skylark, how crucial is observation to your poetry?

EPS: Absolutely essential. Had I not heard that skylark and looked up, that poem would not have been written. Had I not seen that green truck and busted-up Celica, that poem would not have been written. Had I not gotten up before dawn on January 1, 2001, to see the sun rise on the first day of the third millennium, that poem would not have been written. Had I not turned down the radio when the mockingbird perched on the wire, that poem would not have been written. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Wisdom is seeing the miraculous in the common." I don't know how wise I am, but when I look at the common events in my everyday life and write about them, I often find that there is sometimes a little wisdom in the words.

LOVERS ON PŪLEHU ROAD, BETWEEN THE SUGAR MILL AND THE MAUI COUNTY DUMP

Eric Paul Shaffer

His beat-up green pickup faces Haleakalā, her thrased
Celica toward K-Mart, on the shoulder of Pūlehu Road. The lovers
stand in roadside mud, arms encircling

each other, gazing over a field of sugar cane at two boiling columns
of smoke rising from the mill. They stand too close to be casual,

toes dirtied where they hang over the slipper's edge.
The afternoon reveals they should not be there, should not be
together, that only half their hearts attempt

to conceal their meeting. I drive past, but they do not look over,
knowing everyone on the island knows everyone else.

Not wanting to see themselves seen, their heads remain turned away.
My windows are down, and the stink of the dump rattles
white plastic bags tangled in kiawe trees.

I'm glad they let me pass without a glance. I don't want to know
whose wife she is or who his children are

or recognize a Safeway cashier or a meter-reader for Maui Electric.
My mirror shows unmoved lovers embracing
beneath ragged, windy limbs as trash cartwheels across the road.

They know the road to the dump is far too public
for a lover's lane, and they have not forgotten their families

and their friends drive this red-stained, two-lane blacktop
to throw away what they no longer want, what they have used
beyond use, and all the many things they have broken.

EXACTLY

Eric Paul Shaffer

"Do you know how much you need?"
asked Keoki at the hardware store,
but suddenly, it was no longer about rope

for hanging clothes under tropical sun
because his question brought back that day.

"Hey," he said, but I was off and thinking,
already five time zones east
and thirty years from where now I stand:

I'm gazing at a gravestone I glimpsed once
walking in a Vermont cemetery with my dog –

a flat slab of cut gray marble set in the grass,
just a name, two dates, a life
the length of a hyphen, and a single word:

"Enough."

MOZART AND THE MOCKINGBIRD

Eric Paul Shaffer

This morning, I turned down Mozart to listen
to a mockingbird perched on a wire
outside my window. Poor Mozart. Dead,
he was much worse for comparison.
But as soon as I lowered the music,
the mockingbird flew.
He had been listening to Mozart.